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Detroit Free Press Magazine

Nov. 7, 1993



THE WAR TO END ALL PEACE

The not-so-distant echoes
of World War I

BY SHERYL JAMES

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Upfront

EVERY TRUE STORY ENDS IN death," Ernest Hemingway wrote. He was hinting, I think, at the macabre streak in those of us who choose to become historians or, less ambitiously, journalists.

But even history lovers have a limited tolerance for misery. I, for instance, thought I had long ago reached the point where I didn't care to read another word about the Holocaust. What more could be said about genocide on such a scale?

But that was before I discovered Deborah Lipstadt's disturbing book, "Denying the Holocaust," which describes a new twist in the Holocaust story: the growing number of Americans — many of them supposedly educated — who are convinced Hitler's slaughter of 6 million Jews never happened.

Anti-Semitism is not new, and the suggestion that the Holocaust is a Zionist fabrication is at least 40 years old. Almost from the time the first eyewitness accounts of Nazi death camps emerged, conspiracy theorists have waged a cynical counterattack on the truth. Nazi apologists have argued that Hitler never targeted Jews, that the death tolls reported by survivors and historians are wildly inflated, that most of those killed were victims of disease, not a Nazi policy of genocide.

For decades, Holocaust deniers were dismissed as kooks. As historical evidence of Nazi crimes accumulated, those who refused to acknowledge it were consigned to the same lunatic fringe that suspected Neil Armstrong's moon walk had been staged in the Nevada desert.

But in recent years, Lipstadt notes, the kooks have gained a more respectable label. They're now called revisionists. Some have been invited to appear in "debates" staged on college campuses or broadcast over the public airwaves.



Dickerson

One, David Duke, came uncomfortably close to being elected governor of Louisiana.

This was all fresh in my mind the day writer Sheryl James pointed out that this Veterans Day marks the 75th anniversary of the end of World War I — and that, in a very short time, the last living veterans of that war will be lost to us.

In an age of videotape, microfiche and CD-ROM, the passing of a generation of war veterans should pose no threat to the nation's historical memory. But if Lipstadt is right, that memory may be far more fragile than we ever imagined.

Most Americans do not dispute that the Second World War took place, or that millions died in a deliberate campaign to exterminate European Jews.

Far fewer know even the vaguest details of the First.

Yet for most historians, the rise of Adolf Hitler and everything that followed are only the tragic epilogue to the drama that began in August 1914. Even today, as pundits and politicians talk optimistically about a new world order, much of the disorder that prevails in the world harks back to that earlier conflict.

Today's Free Press Magazine cannot bridge the chasm of neglect that lies between our age and a better understanding of the Great War. But if it kindles a spark of interest in a few younger readers, and reminds a few older ones that today's headlines have deep roots in the past, we'll have accomplished something this Veterans Day.

Something worthy of all those wizened soldiers whose own stories are coming to an end.

BRIAN DICKERSON

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Cover photo from "World War I: The Western Front" by Peter Simkins/Military Press, 1991

Brian Dickerson, Editor; James Ricci, Associate Editor; Claire Innes, Art Director; Wendy Warren Keebler, Production Editor; Deborah Withey, Design Director; Antoinette Martin, Sheryl James, Michael Betzold, Staff Writers; Patricia Beck, Staff Photographer.

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FOR ALL BUT A
WIZENED FEW,
WORLD WAR I IS
THE FORGOTTEN
WAR. YET EVEN
NOW — 75 YEARS
AFTER IT ENDED IN
A BOXCAR IN FRANCE — ITS
TRAGIC ECHOES RESOUND
AROUND THE GLOBE.

THE END OF ORDER

My only real connection to World War I is my grandfather. He died when I was 16, long before I thought to ask him about the war to end all wars. His name was William C. Kelly, and he won a bantamweight boxing title at the Great Lakes Naval Reserve Station on Oct. 2, 1918.

I know this because I have the medal. Sometimes I just look at it, picturing it pinned

to a hot, wool uniform.

What became of the uniform? What did my grandfather experience in that war? I'll never know.

But I have spent considerable time since his death reading about World War I. That is a strange hobby for a female ex-hippie of 42 years. I don't know when or how this consuming curiosity began. Sometimes I tell my friends



that I must have been a World War I soldier in a previous life. Sometimes I'm not sure I'm joking.

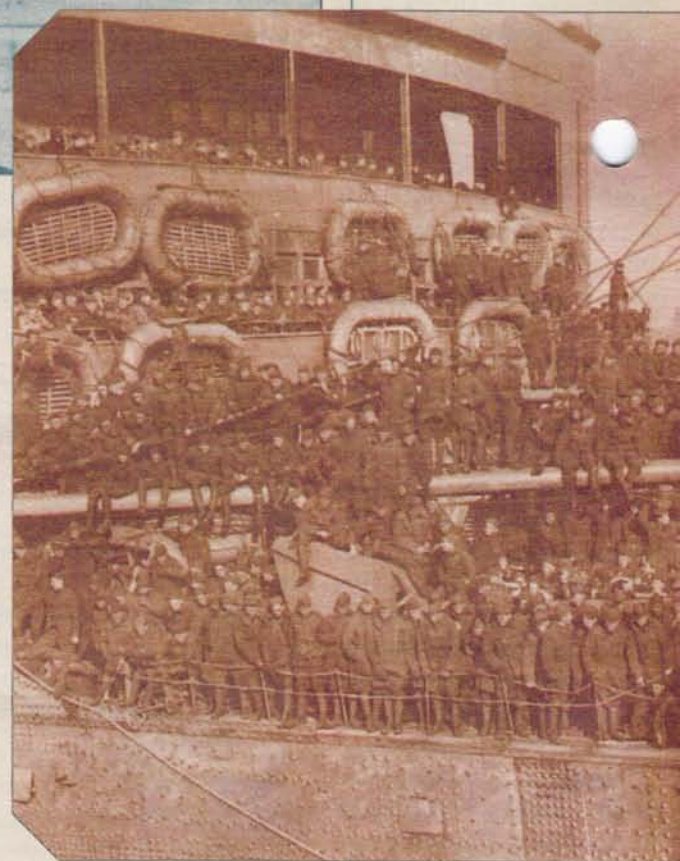
My interest may have been sparked when I read "All Quiet on the Western Front," considered by many the greatest antiwar novel. Erich Maria Remarque's rich portrayal of a German soldier's experiences overwhelmed me; I was moved and depressed for days after reading it.

But what also draws me to World War I is its imminent disappearance from active duty, so to speak, via the death of its last survivors, now in their 90s or older. I have interviewed a number of these old soldiers over the years, and I am always impressed by how easily they cry remembering battles that now rival in age a man's average life span. I look at their craggy faces and faraway expressions and think: These men actually fought in a

some might say — American is. Something in me dreads the passing of the last World War I soldier, the settling adrift of another piece of American history. But that is of course, what happens with wars. Like soldiers, wars grow old and die. The passion of participants bows to the distance of descendants. We move on.

And so I see no great emotion accompanying the passing of the last World War I survivors. Nevertheless, World War I will be our next historical casualty. I find it impossible to let the 75th anniversary of its conclusion pass without due respect.

Seventy-five years ago this Thursday, German and Allied generals met in a railroad car



tremendous war few Americans care about. To me, World War I is the oldest great historical event that we can still — barely — touch.

As a nation, we define ourselves by wars and mark time with them. The older the war, the older — and less fresh,

in the Compiegne Forest in northern France. That they signed documents that ended the deadliest, most widespread and longest continuously fought war known at the time to humankind — a war that surely would end all wars. Nov. 11, now Veterans

BY SHERYL JAMES

Day, has been celebrated ever since.

Wars are wars of attrition. But World War I took that to numbing extreme. A considerable part of a generation of European men was killed or wounded in World War I. In all, 10 million died; 21 million were wounded. (In barely three months of fighting, 116,000 U.S. soldiers were killed, 320,000 wounded.) Many parents lost all their sons.



When it broke out in 1914, everyone assumed the war would not last more than two months. Anyone who suggested that it would drag on for four years would have been met with scoffs, even laughter.

But it did last that long. It is



From far left: Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife minutes before they were assassinated on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo; U.S. troops headed for France on the Leviathan; in 1917, a German soldier uses a frying pan as a gas alarm; a train-station farewell to the doughboys.

not possible to list all the reasons why, but, as much as anything, the war dragged on because the sides were too evenly matched.

Each side had sacrificed too many soldiers to capitulate; neither had enough left to win.

THE FAMOUS ARMISTICE railroad car was seized by a jubilant Hitler during World War II and later bombed in Germany. Another railroad car of the same vintage marks the spot in the French forest today. But little else of the world the Great War knew remains.

It was a world of thatched roofs, dirt roads, peasants in fields, pigs in town squares, ladies in long dresses and

lantern-lit evenings. There were kings, queens, kaisers, even emperors — complete with pageantry.

There was also poverty we can scarcely imagine. An obscene gap separated the very few rich and the masses of poor people in Europe, a situation the ruling class took for granted — and soon enough had only to look back on.

America, meanwhile, was farm-boy innocent. When the war began, the United States had an army of only 126,000, no battle-worthy planes and virtually no modern artillery. In Washington, the General Staff consisted of only 19 officers.

Details of warfare circa 1914 seem almost impossibly old-fashioned. In her 1915 memoirs, a volunteer nurse describes "soldiers sleeping on straw, which crackles when they turn." In a cellar near the front, she and her colleagues share their tinned rabbit with a British journalist

wearing high-top boots and binoculars. The diary also describes typical military reconnaissance: "A watcher in a church tower leans earthward, tells his observations of the enemy to a soldier in the church rafters, who tells them to another soldier on the ladder, who drops them to another on the stone floor, who hurries them to an officer at the telephone in the west front, who tells them to the battery (a group of mounted guns)." During World War I, men traveled across seas in transports — along with hundreds of mules and horses. Fighter planes, making their debut in war, were almost comical. Bombs were thrown overboard by hand; sometimes pilots dropped iron spikes on the enemy. Some pilots carried revolvers, binoculars and empty gasoline cans to hang on to if they were shot down over water.

There were no modern

grenades. Explosive devices were made out of "all sorts of rubbish," one lively Australian World War I veteran once told me. A fuse was attached and lit and the weapon thrown to the enemy's trench. If the enemy was quick, the weapon was tossed right back.

There were sabers, bayonets and cavalry charges. Trenches, muddy and foul, scarred Europe for hundreds of miles, at times separated by no more than a few yards of barren, decimated earth: no-man's-land.

World War I saw the first, crude tanks and the last serious use of horses in battle. Poison gas made its entrance into humankind's arsenal.

I marvel at the eerie front-yard-ness of World War I battles, which could not exist in a world war today. (This was the last time civilians were considered off limits.)

"We still hear the cannon — they are booming this minute — but we have not seen the (Germans') spiked helmets dashing up my hill," Mildred Aldrich wrote in one letter home. Aldrich was an American living in France near the river Marne, where she watched the war's turning point from her house on a hilltop.

"It is only nine days since the French troops advanced — nine days since Paris was saved," she wrote in September.

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ber 1914. "One or two of our older men crossed the Marne on a raft on the 10th, the sixth day of the battle. They brought back word that thousands had lain for days unburied under the hot September sun, but the fire department was already out there from Paris..."

I shudder to imagine the thunder of the big guns that were the hallmark of the Great War. Hundreds of them would open up simultaneously — splitting the sky, pounding villages and towns into barren quagmires.

The beginning of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, for instance, rattled windows in London, 200 miles away. The Germans' awesome "Big Bertha" stretched 12 stories long and fired 276-pound projectiles 75 miles into Paris. The shells sailed through the stratosphere and took three minutes to hit the target.

The war had its bully moments — like the time taxicabs saved Paris — and its stars, dashing and honorable. Ernest Hemingway drove a military ambulance in Italy. Britain's T.E. Lawrence — Lawrence of Arabia — united Arabs against the Turks. The Red Baron, flying ace Manfred von Richthofen, claimed 80 allied aircraft and was so well respected that after the Allies shot him down in France, they gave him a funeral.

I am nothing close to a historian. But I offer the following stories to the people who fought, died and survived this cataclysm — and to those who know nothing of it, in the hope that they

will momentarily appreciate the drama that was World War I.

The Beginning

By 1914, Europe was all dressed for war, just waiting for a date. Technology had produced new, destructive weapons; military drafts had created large standing armies, particularly in Germany. A new passion called nationalism swelled in ordinary citizens, preparing them for the ultimate sacrifice. Nations had entered military alliances, ostensibly as security: Aggressors would be less likely to take on a group of nations rather than just one. But the alliances also meant that nations could be sucked into disputes in which they had no interest.

All of these conditions created a highly flammable Europe. Everyone knew that war could spread from a spark.

The Balkan Peninsula was known as the powder keg of Europe. Many Balkan countries recently had gained independence from the crumbling Ottoman Empire, and they fought over borders continually. Serbia, the dominant Balkan nation bordering Austria-Hungary, wanted to unite all Slavs. Austria-Hungary, Serbia's bitter enemy, feared this would cause unrest among its millions of Slavs.

In 1908, Austria-Hungary infuriated Serbia by annexing the Balkan territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia coveted that land because many Serbs lived there.

Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, wanted

to convey goodwill to the Slavs in his empire and arranged to tour Bosnia. On June 28, 1914, as the archduke and his wife rode through Sarajevo, they were shot and killed by a Serbian extremist.

Though Serbia apologized, Austria-Hungary used the assassination as an excuse to declare war on Serbia one month later.

The alliance chain reaction began.

Slavic Russia, allied with Serbia, mobilized troops along its borders with Austria-Hungary and Germany in support of Serbia. France, allied with Russia, was constrained to follow suit.

Germany, long allied with Austria-Hungary, therefore declared war on Russia Aug. 1 and on France Aug. 3. The subsequent German invasion of Belgium caused Britain to declare war on Germany, since Britain was sworn to protect Belgium's neutrality. Other nations joined sides, and the first world war had begun.

When it was over, Serbia and the Austro-Hungarian

empire had disappeared from the map of Europe. Bosnia and Herzegovina were equally faceless and forgotten.

Until now.

The Battle for Belgium, the Soldier-King, a Lovely Flood

On Aug. 2, 1914, King Albert of Belgium stood in a dark room, his face grave. In his hands was a telegram. This was a moment he had dreaded for years. The telegram was a German ultimatum: *Either let us pass through Belgium to invade France, or you will be considered the enemy.*

Albert, 39, had become Belgium's constitutional monarch only five years before. An intelligent, progressive man who loved adventure and hated pomp, he was already immensely popular.

But now the king and his government faced an agonizing decision. He knew that if he denied Germany access through Belgium, his seven divisions faced decimation at the hands of 34 German divisions. But the

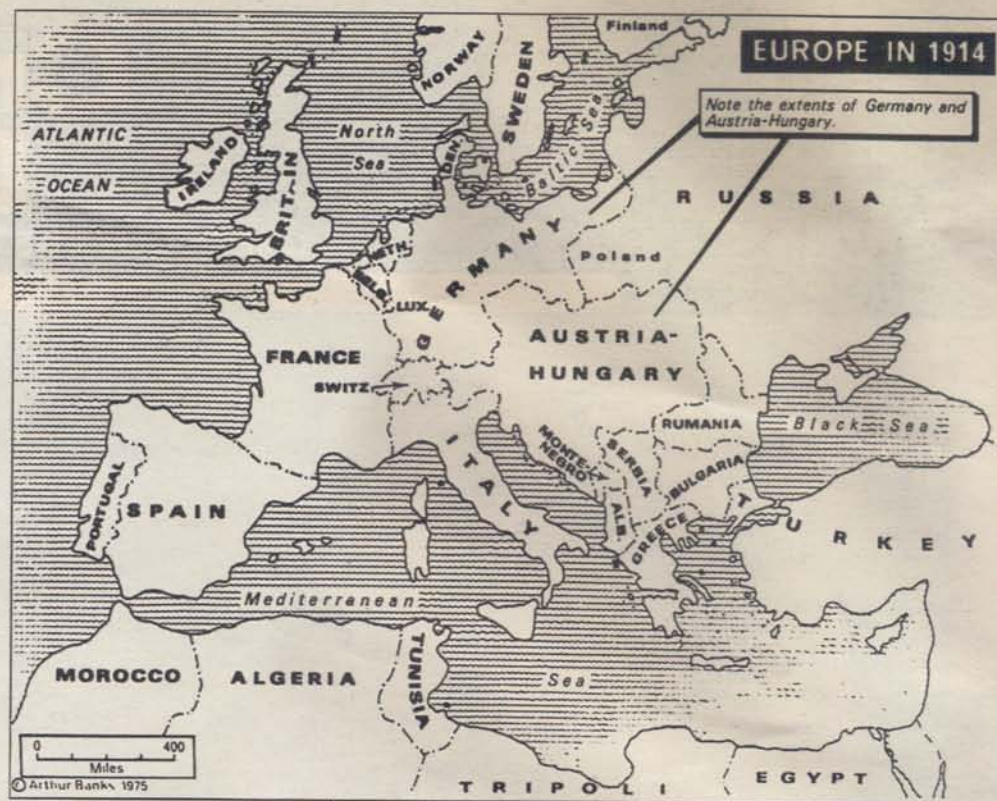
The face of Europe, at the beginning of the war, was about to change.

king thought not only of military consequences. Belgium faced a great moral choice as well.

Strategically located on the sea in northern Europe bordering France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Germany, Belgium had throughout the ages been coveted or conquered by aggressors seeking access to its neighbors. In 1839, an international treaty declared Belgium independent and neutral. If any country invaded Belgium, other powers would come to its aid. Belgium, in turn, pledged not to wage war unless attacked and to remain neutral in any conflicts.

For 80 years, the unusual pact had kept peace in Belgium; now Germany was ignoring it. To look the other way would be to concede that international law was meaningless.

The Germans had given



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Belgium 12 hours to answer, and their military plans hinged on Belgium's swift surrender. But the Germans had underestimated the Belgians and their young king.

In that dim room, surrounded by members of his government, as he clutched the telegram, Albert said simply: "Our answer must be no, whatever the consequences."

Belgium had stood up for what was right — and sealed its fate.

Albert immediately ordered bridges and canals blown up to slow the German advance. He dispatched his army to Liege, the first city to face German attack. He devised a battle plan, and, miraculously, the outnumbered Belgians repelled the overconfident Germans, holding Liege for 10 days before superior German artillery finally prevailed.

In one of the war's uglier moments, the German army executed some innocent civilians and destroyed towns. These attacks were limited, but Allied propaganda had the world horrified at "the rape of Belgium."

From then on, Albert maneuvered, protected and retreated his small army with skill and compassion universally admired. He knew instinctively when to advance, when to hold the

line, when to fall back.

Throughout September and October, the Belgians kept fighting and falling back in good order — yielding Antwerp, then Brussels. It was an inspiring show of resistance, for Belgium fought Germany alone thus far; France and Britain were



Gen. Ferdinand Foch, Allied Supreme Commander, second from right, beside the armistice boxcar.

unable to offer the help Belgium had been guaranteed in the 1839 treaty.

By early October, the Germans had pushed the Belgians to the Yser River, one of the last natural defense barriers east of the sea. The Allies needed the coast, a major landing area for British troops, now desperately fighting in France; a further Belgian retreat would leave all of Belgium occupied.

Albert ordered his army to dig in at the Yser and to hold the line at all costs. The German onslaught began on Oct. 18. It was Belgium's epic moment.

Some 53,000 exhausted, poorly equipped Belgians, with few reserve troops, faced the German offensive — 65,000 men with vastly superior arms and artillery. The Belgians valiantly held for seven days.

On Oct. 24, the Belgians were pressed back to the Dixmude-Neuport railway. The sea was nearly at their backs. But Albert had one last gambit up his sleeve.

Along the Belgian coast, dikes keep sea water and contributing streams from flooding the land. On Oct. 29, Belgian soldiers released locks in sea canals near the German lines. Silently, slowly, the water rose through the night and the following day. It filled ditches, trenches, farmland and fields — a "silent conqueror,"

in one historian's words. The Germans were unable to advance.

For the rest of the war, Albert and his army stayed put, defending 20 square miles of free Belgium. The little piece of home country provided inestimable morale. And Belgium's resistance made a difference. It helped divert German troops during the critical Battle of the Marne. The Belgians also later joined in several Allied offenses.

Albert never left his army. In the darkest hours, he did

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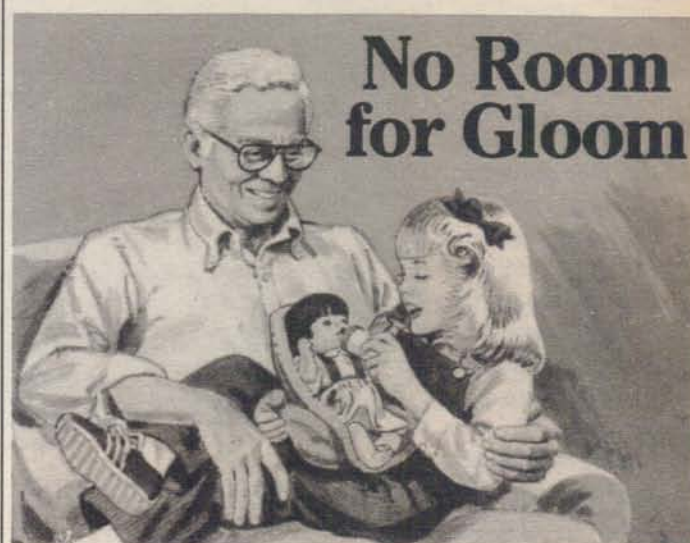
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No Room for Gloom



So many of the things we held dear are disappearing. It makes some of us angry. Others are just saddened by it all. What are we leaving to future generations after our lifetime of labor?

Yes, it's easy to have dark thoughts and allow our spirits to slump. But the history of the past is a good remedy for gloom. Life has always had its ups and downs and the flow of world events has had its high and low moments. And somehow, thanks be to God, the overall picture is one of progress and joy.

It helps, especially at times like this, to look back at the whole picture and reflect on God's loving care. This is what we have done in our pamphlet, "The Catholic Pilgrimage," a summary history of Christianity since the time of the Apostles. It's an inspiring and encouraging story. Write for your free copy. No one will call on you.

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not hole up at headquarters with generals and maps but walked the front lines, often under fire, cheering soldiers. He became affectionately known as Belgium's soldier-king. "The impression," wrote Winston Churchill, then a British naval official, "of the grave, calm Soldier-King presiding at Council, sustaining his troops, preserving an unconquerable majesty amid the ruin of his kingdom, will never pass from my mind."

Albert lived to see his country liberated. He died at age 59 while mountain climbing in 1934.

Taxis and Turning Points

Four weeks after Germany had invaded Belgium, the situation for the Allies

looked hopeless. The German war machine, planning on victory within six weeks, was 30 miles from Paris. One million German troops stretched diagonally on a 75-



mile front across northern France, their right wing sweeping like a clock hand around south, now back northeast toward Paris.

British and French forces had retreated

south for 12 days. A French offensive had failed. On Sept. 2, the French government, with great emotion, left Paris.

Left to the unenviable job of defending the city was Gen. Joseph-Simon Gallieni, recently named Commander of the Armed Forces of Paris at a time when there were no armed forces of Paris. Eventually, he managed to secure some 6,000 troops. But he was left virtually alone in charge of the city, expecting the Germans at the gates any day.

Retreating French and British troops were exhausted. Morale was black; the Germans seemed invincible. But, in fact, the German far right wing, commanded by Gen. Alexander von

Kluck, was too hasty. Smelling total victory, von Kluck advanced far ahead of his own supply lines and heavy artillery — and the rest of the German line — against orders.

On Sept. 3, everyone believed von Kluck was marching toward Paris. In Paris, Gallieni and his staff gloomily tracked the German commander's progress with colored pins on maps. The pins kept moving closer.

Suddenly, as reconnaissance reports flowed in that day, Gallieni and his staff realized that the pins were swerving north of Paris. Von Kluck was headed not to Paris but toward the Marne River, hoping to rout the retreating French and British.

The German line had its back to Paris — completely

exposed to attack!

Excited, Gallieni pushed for a full-scale offensive against the unsuspecting von Kluck. It was a terrifying risk. Available troops were in no shape for combat, and if the offensive failed, the line of retreat, Gallieni admitted, was "nowhere." But the future of France hung in the balance.

The opportunity to attack would last only two days. French commander in chief Gen. Joseph Joffre signed on, but the British were reluctant. Finally, on Sept. 5, Joffre drove 115 miles to persuade the British command in Melun to join the effort.

The Allies attacked at the Marne River at 9 a.m. Sept. 6. The battle was vicious, seesawing for three days. Then the Allied right wing began to falter. As von Kluck closed in, the call went out for reinforcements.

Back in Paris, Gallieni had them — 6,000 of them. But how to get them to the front on time? It was too far to

Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker, top left, downed 26 enemy planes. At bottom left, U.S. soldiers operate a French gun. Above: The battlefield in the Passchendaele Ridge area during the final stages of the Third Battle of Ypres. At right, a German transport driver and his horses wear anti-gas respirators.

march — about 60 kilometers. There were no troop transport planes then, no truck convoys. But Gallieni, a resourceful and impulsive leader famous for his five-minute crisis conferences, had a plan.

"The world remembers the battle ever since," historian Barbara Tuchman wrote in "The Guns of August" by the taxis."

At 1 p.m. on Sept. 8, Gallieni issued the order for all Paris taxis to report to duty. Taxi drivers unloaded pas-

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A CORPS OF SYMPATHIZERS

THE AWFUL PLIGHT OF COMBAT SOLDIERS DURING THE GREAT WAR STILL
SNAGS THE HEARTS OF MODERN ENTHUSIASTS

WHEN LISBETH MAXWELL made a recent visit to France, she says, the trees at Belleau Wood still looked spindly. This was three-quarters of a century after a U.S. Marine brigade, despite terrible casualties, helped thwart the last German offensive of World War I. The trees are green and fully grown, but "they just don't look like they recovered."

Maxwell, who is 34, publishes newsletters and member advisories for Chicago-area health-care associations. This is a busy time for her office; her clients are putting out a great flurry of paper in response to President Bill Clinton's health-care reform proposal. Still, she has taken a week off to attend the third annual World War I seminar in Washington, D.C., specifically to hear a presentation by Robert Asprey, author of "At Belleau Wood."

Maxwell attends the lectures in work clothes: a vibrant red jacket with black-and-white mini-checked walking shorts and tights. But as she listens to Asprey's detailing of the battle, her dark head bent over her notebook, intent on maps and times of day, she is imagining herself someone else.

She's a scared young soldier from Evanston, Ill. — dirty, hot and hungry — who stepped off into a wheat field at dawn and walked into a horizontal hail of machine-gun fire from woods that were supposed to be unoccupied.

After the 45-minute talk, she doesn't bounce out of her seat to get a bottle of pop or a cup of coffee or stroll outside in the sun — the day is warm, but the auditorium is spitefully cold. Instead, she gathers her notes and battered copy of Asprey's book and goes to speak to the author.

For four years, she has been writing a novel about two Evanston families and their experiences during the Great War. One of the central characters is a scared young soldier. He dies at Belleau Wood.

WHEN MOST PEOPLE THINK OF WORLD War I, they think of row on row of white crosses that neatly mark graves from battles that have been otherwise forgotten. The crosses, however, are not the only visible leftovers from the war on the Western Front.

At the Washington seminar, jointly sponsored by the Great War Society and the Western Front Association, photographer J.S. Cartier displays current photos of the battlefields. These show the remnants of a bunker built to shelter a British field hospital, the scar of a French shell big enough to swallow a two-car garage, the concrete platform of the Germans' Paris Gun, which bombarded the French capital in 1918 from 75 miles away.

The people who slowly circle the photo exhibit have given up the last, best weekend of Indian summer to sit through three days of lectures on the Great War. They have come from Massachusetts and Utah, Michigan and Texas, Canada, England and Belgium. They are historians, secretaries, doctors, businessmen, writers and salespeople.

They have come to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Armistice, Nov. 11, 1918. They have come to learn more about the war that has somehow snagged their imaginations. And they have come to remember the men who fought it.

Of the 250 people in attendance at the con-

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BY SUSAN HALL-BALDUF



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sengers, explaining cheerfully that they had to go to the front. By 6 p.m., 600 taxis waited at the gates of Paris, five soldiers in each. Gallieni inspected them in a rare display of unbridled enthusiasm. Then off they drove to the front. Tuchman described the spectacle as "the last crusade of the old world."

The taxis made their mark; the troops held the line. Less than a week from accomplishing their six-week plan, the Germans retreated.

A Daring Retreat

In 1915, the Allies wanted to knock Turkey out of the war. A naval operation had failed, so the Allies had landed troops on the coast of Gallipoli, a Turkish peninsula across the Aegean Sea from Greece. Gallipoli became one of the Allies' most tragic bumbles. For seven months, about 410,000 Allied troops—mostly Australians—and 500,000 Turkish troops fought to a standstill. After losing 252,000 men, the Allies were ready to retreat.

But how? The Gallipoli battleground was a series of trenches in barren, mountainous land. The Allies had come by sea, and they would have to leave the same way. An open retreat would be obvious—and disastrous. Allied commanders estimated that a fifth of their army would be lost.

The only hope was ingenuity and risk: The 200,000 soldiers would *sneak* away.

In December 1915, small groups of men began retreat-

ing at night. Blankets were thrown across walkways to soften footsteps. As the forces diminished, men marched routes over and over to give the illusion of greater troop presence. Supply mules and horses plodded up the hills to the trenches as usual, but with empty crates. Thousands of campfires were lit each night.

The final nights of evacuation were tense. The few Allied troops left were outnumbered five-to-one. If the Turks discovered what was going on, the soldiers who remained were sitting ducks. But how could the last men, some only yards from the enemy, leave unnoticed?

The solution: the homemade self-firing rifle. Two empty kerosene tins were attached to each rifle. Water dripped through a hole in one tin to the other tin beneath it, which was attached by a string to the gun's trigger. When the lower tin got heavy enough, it fired the rifle.

As the last men left, they could hear their own guns firing sporadically.

Not one soldier died.

Gentlemen in a Railroad Car

They met in a railway car in the Compiègne Forest, not far from the front. It was 7 a.m., Nov. 8, 1918. Gen. Ferdinand Foch, Allied Supreme Commander, was cold and unforgiving, as was France. The Germans were anxious.

The war's end had come grudgingly. With thousands of fresh Americans now in the war, the Germans were severely outnumbered. Germany's allies had already sued for peace, and a revolution brewed in Berlin. Still, the Germans had fought hard; casualties were high all summer and autumn.

Now members of a shaky new German government stood, hats in hands, asking for peace. Foch ordered an as-

sistant to read the tough armistice terms.

The Germans tried unsuccessfully to soften the terms, but the Allies were adamant. At 5:10 a.m. on Nov. 11, Foch and the German delegation signed the armistice agreement. Foch ordered all hostilities to cease at 11 that morning—the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918.

JUST AS THE AMERICAN Civil War had swept away the old South, World War I ended a way of life and a generation's sense of its own future.

Gone were all-powerful kings and emperors ruling citizens who never asked why. Gone were their empires. Those who had served shoulder-to-shoulder with gentry wanted more participation in government. Women who had worked in factories and helped win the war gained the right to vote and the urge to work.

Europe, devastated, never regained its international clout; the United States, with its army of 5 million, had emerged as a world power.

The war's appalling toll left young people on both sides of the Atlantic with a deep sense of futility. They were the so-called Lost Generation, portrayed in fiction by Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

They had grown up, Barbara Tuchman wrote, in a world where "glory was a word spoken without embarrassment, and honor a familiar concept that people believed in." But the war's meaninglessness had destroyed all that. "All the great words," said novelist D.H. Lawrence, "were canceled out for that generation."

In my reading about the war, two voices rise above others, framing the glory and death. The first voice is that of Mildred Aldrich, the woman on the hilltop near the river Marne, in her letter dated



Albert, King of the Belgians



U.S. ace Edward V. Rickenbacker



Germany's Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen



Wilhelm II of Germany

April 4, 1917:

"The major part of the peoples of the world are lifting their arms with a great shout for Liberty, Justice and Honor. ... It is not, I know, today or tomorrow that it will all end. ... But at least we are sure now of the course the treatment is going to take—so the sun shines and my heart is high, and I do believe that though joy may lead nowhere, sorrow is never in vain."

The second voice belongs to the German soldier in "All Quiet on the Western Front," published in 1928:

"Had we returned home in 1916, out of the suffering and strength of our experiences we might have unleashed a storm. Now if we go back we

will be weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, and without hope. We will not be able to find our way any more.

"And men will not understand us—for the generation that grew up before us ... already had a home and a calling ... and the generation that has grown up after us will be strange to us and push us aside. We will be superfluous even to ourselves, we will grow older, a few will adapt themselves, some others will merely submit, and most will be bewildered;—the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin."

SHERYL JAMES is a *Free Press Magazine* staff writer.

A CORPS OF SYMPATHIZERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

ference, about 15 are female.

"I'm always surprised to see you girls here," says Frank Slanker, a large, slouchy retiree with a drooping mustache. His tone is kindly. Several of the "girls" discuss this remark over lunch and decide to forgive. Slanker, who is from Richmond, Va., clearly doesn't mean to offend.

His interest in the war goes back to childhood. He was born in 1918 and grew up "when there was only one world war." His aunts had books about the Great War, he says. "When I went to visit them, I'd go for those books right away." He and his friends acted out their own version of trench warfare in the backyard. Eventually, he was given those books. He kept them still. "The First World War was the seminal event of this century," he says.

Slanker served in the Army during the Second World War. The United States was running supplies to the Soviet Union up the Persian Gulf and across Iran; Slanker was stationed in Tehran. He saw Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin when they came to the city for their 1943 conference.

His particular interest in the First World War is the Navy. "That, and battles and their heroes" — what there were of them. Individual effort didn't count for much on the Western Front. Plenty of men got their brains blown out merely by sticking their heads up to see if the guys in the trench 300 yards away were about to make a move.

Slanker snoozes a little during a seminar on the politics of the time, and he isn't the only one. (Some other people doze off during a discussion of U.S. naval strategy.) He settles back with evident pleasure, stretching one tweedy sleeve along the back of the seat next to his, for Gen. Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley's analysis of the personalities of the British high command.

FARRAR-HOCKLEY, GBE, KCB, DSO, MC, was commissioned as a second lieu-

tenant in a World War II parachute battalion, was director of combat development for the British army and is now the British Cabinet Office historian. Round and cheery, he still has a certain bite. When the slide projector he intends to use for his keynote speech on the Battle of the Somme does not work, he barks at the projectionist, "Is it on? Look. There should be a switch. It would say 'off' and 'on.'"

Farrar-Hockley and two others, Dr. Timothy Nenniger and Dr. Edward Coffman, whose lectures are on American generals, sound a little defensive. General-bashing is a favorite sport for many World War I buffs. Somebody had to be at fault for what amounted to four years of futility, stupidity, stubbornness and greed, paid for by the blood of an estimated 1 million British, 1½ million French and 2 million German dead.

"They made the ultimate sacrifice," says David Organ, 12, who has taken time off from school in his native England to attend the conference with his parents. Though he can chat enthusiastically and authoritatively about the British Regular Army — "They fired 15 rounds a minute with perhaps 75-percent accuracy, so they could shoot the enemy at a rate of, well, 12 per minute" — when he speaks of the casualties, his round, freckled face grows solemn.

David became interested in the Great War four years ago when he realized he was the only child in his class whose grandfather had fought in it. His grandfather was gassed at the Second Battle of Ypres, Belgium, in February 1915. Pvt. Charles Organ, later a staff sergeant, survived the gassing, fought at the Somme and then traveled to southern France in a "40-and-eight" truck (it could carry 40 men or eight horses). From there, he shipped out to Salonika, Greece, where he contracted malaria.

Malaria and the aftereffects of chlorine gas troubled Charles Organ for the rest of his life, says his son Geoffrey, 65. But Charles Organ felt lucky he was never

wounded and lived to see the war end.

The family is from the town of Plaxton in Kent, England. Plaxton has a population of about 900, just as it did at the time of the war. According to the village war memorial, 48 men — or a fourth of those between ages 18 and 35 — died in the fighting. When David and his father first visited the battlefields in France, they took a cemetery tour. "It seemed necessary," David says soberly.

A minute later, he is happily describing his collection of artifacts: a full sergeant's uniform given to him by a theater troupe, an enlisted man's diary found at a secondhand shop (the Imperial War Museum in London has a diary kept by a captain of the same unit), a set of the firearms carried by British infantrymen. All the weapons have been welded so they can't fire any of the live bullets

David has found on the battlefields.

For his birthday, his parents had a model of the Somme battlefield made for him. It is much like the one at the Imperial War Museum, only smaller. It had to fit on a table in his crowded bedroom.

David turns up his nose at the museum's model. He thinks such an extensive display should be more realistic. "Only 200 soldiers," he

sniffs. "And no dead."

THIRTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD MELINDA Giordano, who is a secretary from Los Angeles, is in charge of membership for the Western Front Association's U.S. chapter. Her black hair is cut in a precise pageboy; her makeup is dramatic; she wears a floaty silk shirt with skin-tight bicycle shorts and ankle-boots.

Her interest in World War I was sparked by a "Masterpiece Theatre" treatment of "Testament of Youth," Vera Brittain's antiwar memoir about losing brothers and beaux. "I'm interested in the sentiments of war," says Giordano. "That's why I collect postcards. I want a record of what people of the time wrote. Their emotions."

JOHN WILCOX'S FATHER, HAROLD, was sports editor of the Detroit Times in 1917 when the United States entered the war. He followed a company of Detroiters to Camp Custer, near Battle Creek, for basic training, and he filed a daily report to the newspaper. When the unit was shipped to France, Wilcox tagged along, arriving at the Argonne just as the war ended.

The Detroit Times ran ads on city streetcars about its adventuring sports editor, says 66-year-old Farmington Hills resident John Wilcox, with evident pride. "They were advertising that he'd be back in time for spring training — and he was."

"EXCEPT FOR MILITARY PERSONNEL and academics, Americans aren't really interested in the war," says Curt Rastetter, a 44-year-old ex-Marine who's a financial services broker in Mission Viejo, Calif. "But it's vital. If you want to understand the 20th Century, you have to understand the First World War."

Liz Maxwell, the novelist-in-progress, says the war "was a clash between the past and the future. Mustard gas was the future, and at the same time horses were hauling things all around."

For 12-year-old David Organ, the issue of why the Great War still matters comes down to one simple element: the soldiers in the trenches, who endured mud and barbed wire, rats and lice, hunger, fatigue and fear.

"When you talk to the old fellows who were there," says British military historian Farrar-Hockley, "they complain of the rotting corpses and the flies — that's what they talk about."

The soldiers' fear of being blown to bits was worse than their fear of being shot, says Dr. William Hannigan, who spoke on the subject of shell shock. The fear was only made worse by the presence of so many bits of other people lying around. Even when the remains of the dead could be buried, they were often brought back up by the next wave of shelling. A memorial near the Somme names 72,000 British soldiers who died there but have no known graves.

"They suffered," David Organ says of the men who fought alongside his grandfather. "It's important to remember because they suffered."

SUSAN HALL-BALDUF is a Free Press copy editor.

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